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Cattail Expansion Rate Slows

Encouraging sign for Everglades recovery



Just as doctors look at multiple indicators to determine your overall health and well-being, scientists also look at multiple indicators to determine the condition of the Everglades.

One factor is cattail growth. Based on the latest South Florida Water Management District report, the prognosis indicates that the Everglades is responding favorably to phosphorus-

reduction treatments. Between 1995 and 2003, the rate of cattail expansion in Water Conservation Area 2A (WCA-2A) declined from 2,375 acres per year to 785 acres per year.

A small portion in the northern tip of WCA-2A shows a marked decrease in cattail coverage due to a combination of upstream phosphorus reduction activities, the redistribution of inflow patterns, and natural fires.

"While the overall goal is restoration, reversing cattail expansion throughout the Everglades is extremely important," said Chip Merriam, deputy executive director for water resources. "The downward trend is promising news that our clean up efforts are working."

Due to historical nutrient buildup in the soils, water managers did not expect to see such dramatic changes this soon in the cattail expansion rate. However, phosphorus levels have been reduced significantly and much of the treated inflows have been distributed in an attempt to more closely mimic historic

sheetflow into the Everglades. Scientists also point out that a number of natural conditions (such as fire, wind, and fluctuating water levels due to floods and droughts) play a role in cattail growth and could influence future status reports. For example, the spread of sparse cattail into the marsh interior may be attributed to a combination of factors including nutrient loadings and reflux of phosphorus from the soils, which are exacerbated by higher water levels.

WHY ARE CATTAILS BAD FOR THE EVERGLADES?

Cattails are a natural aquatic plant, typically found in wetland systems around the world, including the Everglades. In fact, it is an approved species for shoreline restoration projects in the state of Florida. Under historic conditions, the Everglades' low-nutrient levels kept the smattering of cattail plants in check.

But cattail is an aggressive, opportunistic plant. Fueled by high

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